

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes, May 3, 2016
Rembert Dennis Building, Columbia, SC

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Mike Hutchins, Bobby Garmany, Stan Halliday, Sam Hiott, Stephen Thomas, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon, Titus Duren

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Cleve Smith

STAFF PRESENT:

Emily Cope, Billy Dukes, Derrell Shipes, Sam Chappellear, Michael Hook, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Bob Perry, Susan Johnson

Chair Hutchins opened the meeting and welcomed the return of Committee Member Herbert, following her accident in 2015. Ms. Herbert was applauded for her strength, courage and will to survive throughout her long recovery.

The minutes of the February 2, 2016 were approved as submitted.

There were no constituents present

SAMWORTH MANAGEMENT PLAN OVERVIEW:

Assistant Chief of Wildlife Sam Chappellear distributed copies of Samworth WMA Management Activities (copy attached to the original minutes).

Mr. Chappellear reported the last wetland management plan written by DNR staff for Samworth WMA was completed in 1997 and was used until 2004. In 2004, a peer review team was established by the Waterfowl Advisory Committee, which was later combined with the WFF Advisory Committee. The team conducted a review of Samworth WMA and authored a document that has been used as the guiding management plan for the site.

Mr. Chappellear stated infra-structure work, repair of leaking dikes and trunks, installation of new trunks, and re-topping of dikes had to be conducted before any successful management could occur in the impoundments. He added staff has now written a new management tool for desired moist soil aquatics.

Mr. Chappellear reported the current wetland management plan for Samworth lists a number of objectives, including providing quality wintering and migration habitat for waterfowl, re-topping perimeter and interior dikes, converting many impoundments into moist soil management, utilizing herbicides, fire, mowing, and rotovating as necessary, replacing and/or adding trunks as needed, and re-topping areas that were lost due to the 2015 flood. Staff will also continue work with FEMA to construct a setback dike in the Upper Middleton Cut impoundment where a breach occurred during the flood, and will continue to provide waterfowl hunting opportunities to the general public.

Mr. Chappellear announced staff is proposing that Samworth be classified a Category 2 waterfowl area (from a Category 1), in an effort to provide maximum hunting opportunities. Depending on the way the calendar falls,

8 hunts could potentially be provided. As a Category 2 area, Samworth will be open on Saturday mornings only (until noon). The same restrictions as other Category 2 areas will also apply at Samworth (i.e., 25 shell limit, first come, first serve basis).

After a brief discussion, Committee Member Hiott stated it wasn't working like it was and it is a good idea to change the system to see if it can be improved. Mr. Chappellear stated staff is willing to try and if it does not work out, it can be changed back to a Category 1.

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF PROVIDING PUBLIC LANDS:

WFF Deputy Director Emily Cope reported DNR has a year-long 75th anniversary celebration underway. In 1941, the agency purchased its first Wildlife Management Area, Webb Wildlife Center. For 75 years, DNR has continued to grow the WMA program from a 5,000-acre tract to a massive, statewide collection of lands providing a wealth of public access. The year-long celebration is an outreach effort to promote the wildlife management areas and the benefits they provide the citizens of South Carolina.

Mrs. Cope presented a video to the Committee promoting the 75th anniversary. It is currently being shown in DNR customer service areas across the State and on You Tube and Face Book. Several open-house events are planned and the first will be held at the Webb Wildlife Center on June 4th. Stations will be set up with a variety of activities the public can enjoy. Mrs. Cope commended staff for their enthusiasm and efforts in planning to make these events successful. An art contest is going on in the local schools and the winner will be announced during the open house. Staff hopes to reach people that do not know what a wildlife management area is and the many recreational opportunities they provide. An open house is also planned during the fall at Wateree River Heritage Preserve.

Chair Hutchins commended staff on the kick-off of the 75th anniversary celebration held at the Webb Center on March 11, 2016.

SC BOBWHITE INITIATIVE:

Small Game Project Leader Michael Hook provided several handouts relating to the initiative (copies attached to the original minutes).

Mr. Hook reported in 2014, a group of state and federal agencies, conservation groups, sportsmen and landowners formed the SC Quail Council with the goal of planning and carrying out a statewide recovery of bobwhites. He explained science-based approaches exist and have been proven around the country to have a significant impact. Mr. Hook stated implementing this science is a tough task and requires a coordinated effort between many organizations over a broad area of land.

Mr. Hook said the Council is the backbone of The South Carolina Bobwhite Initiative, combining existing science and available resources to launching a statewide strategic effort. Four regions were identified and are called Focal Regions. These regions cover more than 7 million acres that hold the highest potential for quickly growing coveys of bobwhites.

Mr. Hook stated there are currently an estimated 23,000 coveys of quail in these Focal Regions. Carrying out a coordinated plan could increase the number to 52,000 coveys. Within the Focal Regions, the Quail Council has identified four Focus Areas that comprise large landscapes where work and resources will be focused. Mr. Hook said methods proven to grow substantial numbers of bobwhites, such as prescribed burning, timber thinning, field burning, field borders and brood fields are being utilized.

Mr. Hook reported this is the biggest wildlife challenge South Carolina has ever faced and the initiative is calling upon farmers, landowners, and bobwhite hunters to help expand the work throughout these Focal Regions. A website has been created (www.scbobwhites.org) so individuals can learn more about participating in this once-in-a-lifetime challenge.

SC FISHING TOURNAMENT EVENTS:

Freshwater Fisheries Chief Ross Self reported an individual by the name of Ray Scott organized the first professional bass fishing tournament in 1967 at Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas. The tournament consisted of 106 anglers from 15 states. The popularity of bass fishing tournaments has continued to increase since that time. As a result, a few years ago the Forrest L. Wood group was formed, now called the FLW Series, which operates worldwide. Mr. Self said states compete to host these tournaments.

In early 2000, Mr. Self said individuals wanted the state to develop infrastructure that would support hosting these types of tournaments. Several large boat ramps were built, including one at the Santee Lake system and one at Lake Thurmond, but they received public pushback.

Mr. Self reported in 2012, following revisions to Chapter 13 fishing regulations changing restrictions on a number of species, the drought also broke. Lake bottoms that had been exposed were flooded, producing strong recruitment classes of fish reproduction. Mr. Self stated freshwater fishing in South Carolina is as good as it has been in his 31 year history with the agency. He added he has heard from fishermen throughout the state that fishing is good! As a result, South Carolina receives a lot of interest from fishing organizations.

Boating access funds and monies received from the 12 Mile Creek PCB contamination settlement allowed DNR to work with Anderson County to build a large boat ramp at Green Pond on Lake Hartwell. Outreach efforts throughout the agency have developed strong relationships with tourism boards around the state to promote fishing opportunities. As a result, in 2014 the Forrest Wood Cup FLW tournament was held on Lake Murray. The winner was from Prosperity, South Carolina, and the prize was \$500,000. Since that time, fishing tournaments have continued to increase in South Carolina. They generate a lot of interest with an economic impact of millions of dollars for the state. Mr. Self anticipates additional tournament announcements for the state at the American Sportfishing Association's ICAST tradeshow in July.

Mrs. Cope stated it is an exciting time for freshwater fisheries, having national attention on South Carolina, generating publicity for the agency and a lot of interest in freshwater fishing. Mrs. Cope hopes it will also help generate license revenue while giving DNR an opportunity to show the General Assembly the importance of funding and supporting the freshwater fisheries section. She credits staff with excellent management of the State's fisheries resources.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:

Mrs. Cope stated staff remains optimistic regarding deer legislation and expects within the next couple of weeks there will be a conference committee to finalize the bill. She further stated she will be very surprised if deer legislation is not passed this year, although she is not certain about changes from DNR's version.

Staff has also been working very hard on budget issues. Mrs. Cope reported Director Taylor has spent a tremendous amount of time meeting individually with key legislators. She noted the budget is looking good and the agency now has support it didn't historically have due to a better understanding by members of the General Assembly about what DNR does, especially in the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries section.

Mrs. Cope reported there are a number of bills pending. New cobia legislation has been finalized and the grass carp legislation (a technical fix for clarification to an item in the Chapter 13 rewrite) should be finalized this week and sent to the Governor for signature.

The cross-over date for legislation has passed and budget debates may begin as early as this week.

AQUATIC PLANT MANAGEMENT:

Bob Perry, Director of DNR's Environmental Programs, stated the Draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan has been approved with the addition of whether or not carp would be released into Lakes Marion and Moultrie. Since there was not enough data to fully evaluate the effects of the release, a "no action" alternative was utilized. No carp will be stocked in the Santee Cooper Lakes System. Mr. Perry reported staff continues to assess the lake system to see if there will be any change due to flooding.

Mr. Perry addressed the Committee regarding Lake Thurmond and noted it is the largest of the three Corps of Engineers Savannah Lakes and is extremely diverse in its bathymetry. Mr. Perry announced the COE estimates there are 3,667 acres of hydrilla on the lake that need to be treated.

Mr. Perry reported cyanobacteria grows on hydrilla during warm weather months producing a toxin that is ingested by birds. The toxin from cyanobacteria accumulates in the bird food chain developing a neurological condition in birds called Avian Vacuolar Myelinopathy (AVM), making them easy prey for eagles. The issue has created an eagle mortality on Lake Thurmond. Mr. Perry stated AVM has been confirmed in 29 of the 81 dead eagles recovered at Lake Thurmond. Many carcasses recovered were too damaged to analyze.

After much study and numerous meetings by the COE, it has public noticed a draft finding of no significant environmental impact. The draft plan will not be finalized until comments have been received and reviewed. The due date for comments is May 31, 2016. The plan includes 4 options; no action, one biological control technique (release of grass carp), one chemical control technique (a very expensive use of herbicides) and an integrated approach between chemical and biological (incremental grass carp stocking and herbicide use).

DNR staff from the Land, Water and Conservation Division and the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division recently met to discuss this issue. Staff has been asked to submit recommendations by mid-May and they will be integrated into a final recommendation from the agency. Mr. Perry feels both divisions will be in agreement on their recommendations.

Based on a COE mail survey to determine estimated opinions, data indicates fishermen and hunters at Lake Thurmond feel something should be done about the hydrilla.

DNR staff feels the integrated approach is reasonable, more pragmatic and less expensive. Staff plans to recommend careful monitoring and an adaptive management plan. In addition, staff plans to strongly recommend the COE replace the loss of habitat. Mr. Perry stated the habitat enhancements would most likely have to be structural. The plan also calls for certified, sterile fish to be released. Staff will recommend the State of South Carolina protocol per the grass carp statute be utilized.

Mr. Perry reported 2 public meetings are scheduled to provide information and receive additional public comments. The meetings will be held on May 16 at McCormick County High School and May 17 in Appling, Georgia at the Eubanks Blanchard Community Center. The COE has contacted media outlets to notify the public of these upcoming meetings.

OTHER OLD and/or NEW BUSINESS:

There was no old or new business.

Mrs. Cope reported that Vice-Chair Smith is dealing with a health issue and asked members to keep him in their prayers.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

Committee Member Thomas asked since Samworth will become a Category II waterfowl area if there will be bag surveys from hunters? Mrs. Cope stated with many different entrance points at Samworth, it would be difficult to collect the data. Mr. Thomas replied data from Samworth goes back to the early 1960s and suspending collection would not be good. Mrs. Cope stated staff will discuss what options may be available for continuation of data collection.

Mr. Thomas also stated the number of draw hunt applications has steadily increased over the years and the number of slots for the hunters has not changed. He reported in a 30-year window, a state duck hunter can expect to get drawn 8 times. Mr. Thomas further stated this is going to be an increasing problem and he is not sure how it can be addressed, but he wants to keep the issue in front of the committee.

Derrell Shipes, Chief of Statewide Projects, reported as DNR has added properties, the opportunity has increased but the challenge is to provide balance in quality of hunts, staff, equipment, and opportunity.

Committee Member Garmany reminded the committee the Governor's Cup begins next week in Charleston and goes through July. He asked if members were in the area to please stop by and check out the wonderful events planned.

Committee Member Hiott encouraged staff to continue to look for ways to find money to expand hunting opportunities. Mr. Hiott said staff is doing a good job, which is reflected in the quality of hunts and the increase of draw duck hunt applicants.

Committee Members were given a copy of the 2016 SCDNR Wildlife Technician Newsletter. Chair Hutchins encouraged members to read the newsletter.

Chair Hutchins also congratulated Committee Members Garmany and Thomas on their reappointments to the committee.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

August 9, 2016, location to be announced.